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NEGRO MUSIC AT BIRTH

By NATALIE CURTIS BURLIN

IN the South, a white musician stumbles upon experiences that may be counted as among the most awakening of his life, for there the spirit of the Negro is often loosed in music that makes one wonder at the possibilities of the race. Far down in Alabama where the "Black Belt" is broad and the Negroes outnumber the whites, I touched upon something that class-rooms and concert-halls rarely hold,—nothing less than the primitive essence of untaught and unteachable creative art.

It was at the Calhoun Industrial School (whose existence was inspired by the example of Hampton Institute) that a great meeting of colored people was held one year to listen to discussions by Northern white scholars concerning the advancement of their race. Over tawny roads that stretched beneath tall pine trees came the people of the "Black Belt" in wagons and astride of plodding mules; brown mules, black mules, lemon-colored mules—they came with their dusky riders from all directions in an endless stream, and I particularly remember the flash of a red petticoat across a white mule glinting through the green. Such shining good-natured faces,—pure Negroes these with little admixture of white blood, representing different types of the many tribes brought from all parts of Africa by the slave-trade, through which captives from the far interior and from the opposite coasts of the Dark Continent were finally landed in America. Some of the men were tall, and their aquiline noses and pointed beards told of the strain of Arab and other Semitic blood that runs through many a native of Africa's East Coast; others were swart and thickset, with flat noses and heavy lips. Many were so ebony black that the shadows in their smooth skins seemed a soft gray-purple, like deep ripe grapes. No European peasantry could have offered to the painter more striking material than these dark-skinned sinewy people in their blue jeans and bright calicoes amid the deep tones of the pines.

They hitched their animals in the woods and gathered in a cleared space under the trees. These colored folk had come many miles over mountain and valley from their crude log-cabins, and they assembled long before the hour. To them this gathering

had almost the significance of a religious service, a "Camp-meet'n" of the olden time. Seated in rows, reverent and silent, they waited for something to happen. And as they sat, patient in the early warmth of the April sun, suddenly a rhythmic tremor seemed to sway over the group as a sweep of wind stirs grasses; there arose a vibration, an almost inaudible hum—was it from the pine trees or from this mass of humanity?—and then the sound seemed to mold itself into form, rhythmic and melodic, taking shape in the air, and out from this floating embryo of music came the refrain of a song quavered by one voice, instantly caught up by another—till soon the entire gathering was rocking in time to one of the old plantation melodies! Men, women and children sang, and the whole group swung to and fro and from side to side with the rhythm of the song, while many of the older people snapped their fingers in emphasis like the sharp click of an African gourd rattle.

It was spirited singing and it was devout; but the inspirational quality of the group-feeling made this music seem a lambent, living thing, a bit of "divine fire" that descended upon these black people like the gift of tongues. It was as though the song had first hovered in the trees above their swaying forms, intangible, till one of them had reached up and seized it, and then it had spread like flame. And as usual with Negroes, this was extemporaneous part-singing,—women making up alto, men improvising tenor or bass, the music as a whole possessed so completely by them all (or so utterly possessing them!) that they were free to abandon themselves to the inspiration of their own creative instinct.

Often in the South I heard this same strange breathless effect of a song being born among a group simultaneously, descending, as it were, from the air. On a suffocatingly hot July Sunday in Virginia, in a little ramshackle meeting-house that we had approached over a blinding road nearly a foot deep in dust, a number of rural Negroes had gathered from an outlying farm, dressed all in their dust-stained Sunday best for the never-to-be-omitted Sabbath service. Their intense and genuine piety with its almost barbaric wealth of emotion could not but touch a visitor from the cold North. The poverty of the little church was in itself a mute appeal for sympathy. A gaudy and somewhat ragged red table cloth covered the crude pulpit on which rested a huge and very battered Bible,—it had probably sustained many vigorous thumps during the high-flown exhortations of the gilt-spectacled preacher. A crazy lamp, tilted side-ways, hung from

the middle of the ceiling. Through the broken window-shutters (powerless to keep out the diamond glare of the morning sun) came slits of light that slanted in syncopated angles over the swarthy people, motes dancing in the beams. No breeze; the sticky heat was motionless; from afar came a faint sound of chickens clucking in the dust. Service had already begun before we came and the congregation, silent and devout, sat in rows on rough backless benches. The preacher now exhorted his flock to prayer and the people with one movement surged forward from the benches and down onto their knees, every black head deep-bowed in an abandonment of devotion. Then the preacher began in a quavering voice a long supplication. Here and there came an uncontrollable cough from some kneeling penitent or the sudden squall of a restless child; and now and again an ejaculation, warm with entreaty, "O Lord!" or a muttered "Amen, Amen"—all against the background of the praying, endless praying.

Minutes passed, long minutes of strange intensity. The mutterings, the ejaculations, grew louder, more dramatic, till suddenly I felt the creative thrill dart through the people like an electric vibration, that same half-audible hum arose,—emotion was gathering atmospherically as clouds gather—and then, up from the depths of some "sinner's" remorse and imploring came a pitiful little plea, a real Negro "moan", sobbed in musical cadence. From somewhere in that bowed gathering another voice improvised a response: the plea sounded again, louder this time and more impassioned; then other voices joined in the answer, shaping it into a musical phrase; and so, before our ears, as one might say, from this molten metal of music a new song was smithied out, composed then and there by no one in particular and by everyone in general.

With the Negro, it would seem that the further back one traces the current of musical inspiration that runs through the race, (that is, the more primitive the people and thus the more instinctive the gift,) the nearer does one come to the divine source of song,—intuition, which is in turn the well-spring of all genius. So often does education deaden and even utterly destroy intuitive art in individuals as in races, that one might affirm that the genius is he who can survive the attrition of scholastic training! Certainly no sophisticated part-singing sounds in my memory with the poignant charm of the unconscious music which I heard one day in a big tobacco factory in the South where a group of utterly illiterate and ignorant black laborers were sorting tobacco leaves

in a dusty, barren room. Rough sons and daughters of toil, ragged and unkempt, no one could accuse them of ever having come under the smooth influence of "refined white environment." Crude and primitive they were in looks as in speech. Yet I never heard collective voices that were sweeter or that appealed more immeasurably to the imagination with their penetrating, reed-like beauty of quality. The fields, the hot sun, the open sky sang through them. And the harmonies with which these workers adorned their half barbaric melodies seemed prismatic in their brilliant unmodulated grouping of diatonic chords, their sudden interlocking of unrelated majors and minors, and their unconscious defiance of all man-made laws of "voice progressions." Such rich, colorful music, (and in my memory I cannot separate the sound of it from the picture of the tobacco leaves in the brown hands), it seemed as though these singers painted with their voices that barren room. And I thought "yes,—that is the Negro. So he has done always. With song he has colored his shadowed life, evoking hope, joy, beauty even, from within himself."

Yet in the voices of these toilers lingered an indescribable pathos, a something both child-like and touching. For with all his brawn, his good-humor, and his wide, ready smile, the Negro, when he sings, tells something of that shadow that only song can lighten. Probably no blacks in the country were more backward than these factory-hands, laboring so monotonously in the lazy haze of Southern heat,—a heat that puts one's brain to sleep. That they could sing extemporaneously in harmonies that not only approached real art but that touched one's very soul, seemed a proof that though this is still a child-race, the long path of human evolution and advance stretches before it in endless promise. Is it not in the Song of the Negro that we glimpse the spirit of the race reaching forward toward development and eventual unfolding? And when we see that song illumining with an inner light multitudes otherwise darkly inarticulate and groping, we think of Emerson and ponder:

"The Negro 'Over-Soul'—is it Music?"